

Country Hospitality

To get close to the real Italy, go out into the countryside where the living is easy and the scenery is perfect. Here we suggest some very special destinations.



"As recently as 1995 there was nothing here," says Luciana Pancera. She points to the rolling green countryside, dotted with olive trees, medieval hilltop villages and ancient Roman ruins and artifacts. The area, known as Sabina, lies 30 miles northeast of Rome and is renowned for its olive oil, which has the rare privilege of DOC and DOP denominations (of guaranteed and protected origin). It seems a land blessed by the gods, or at least one mightily well looked upon by them. The problem, or maybe the attraction, of the rolling Rieti valley is that very few people know about it.

Luciana Pancera, a former flight attendant, has made it her life's work to change this, applying the drive of her native Milan to tirelessly promoting an area she grew to love after marrying a local-born pilot, Luigi, twenty-six years ago. She knew from the start that "Tuscany was overdone" and that here was an area reeking with "authenticity, uncontaminated nature, genuine food and popular festivals that the people stage for themselves and not for tourists". Her husband had bought a property near Selci Sabino before meeting her, and Luciana slowly started transforming Villa Vallerosa into a farm holiday estate with seven apartments. The 15-hectare estate is made up of a main house built in the 1900s and two other 19th-century constructions. With all this potential literally at her doorstep, Luciana started visiting the international tourist fairs in the Netherlands, Germany, Britain and France to promote the area. She recalls people asking her in broken English, "But Sabina...is that you?" No one knew what she was talking about. Not long afterward she founded a consortium made up of local historic homes, country estates, and even a convent. Many of the properties have pools, some have restaurants, and all the rest have self-catering facilities. In 2000 it had eight members, now it has twenty-five, grouped together under the umbrella name of Best of Sabina (www.bestofsabina.it). Clients were mainly Dutch at first, but now many more Britons, Americans and even a few French or Spanish families are appearing. To belong to the non-profit cooperative, members have to subscribe to a quality protocol that Luciana sums up as follows: "The accommodations they offer should be panoramic and unspoiled, and the owners should be people who take real pleasure in offering hospitality." Their motivation has to be a strong passion for their home and the area, since as Luciana says: "I could never do this to make money." She sees this venture as a way of keeping these houses alive while allowing people to get to know the wonders of this territory. A young Dutch couple lazing by the pool are Sabina converts after a week spent here. "I actually prefer this to Tuscany," says Ivonne enthusiastically, "it has more green and more nature." Like many people the couple had never heard of this area before and found it through an agency in the Netherlands. Though they visited Rome twice during their stay, they have spent most of the time exploring the Sabina area. Within easy reach is the 10th-century hill town of Selci and the equally panoramic village of Casperia. Close to hand are also the famous Franciscan sanctuaries of the so-called Sacred Valley; Farfa's abbey, for centuries a great spiritual and cultural center; the Romanesque church of Santa Vittoria and countless archaeological sites. Within an hour's drive are Orvieto, Spoleto and Assisi. And, of course, Rome is accessible by bus, train and car.



On our tour of farm holiday estates in Sabina, our next stop is Montasola, a medieval village perched on a rocky spur at an altitude of about 2,300 feet above sea level. It has only forty inhabitants in the winter months. The Monte Piano house is the most dramatic of the buildings, standing above fortified walls and encompassing a tower that forms part of the town's entrance. The house belongs to Letizia Gabbuti's family and its originally 40 -or-so rooms have been turned into four apartments. The whole structure was renovated a few years ago, though not without mishaps. Letizia recounts how one evening she came back to find all the frescoes on the walls covered with thick layers of plaster applied by the workmen. She was in time to save only three rooms, the others were too far gone. The dramatic tower is about to be

restored, too, and she hopes to turn it into a place where visitors can sample various types of olive oil—"somewhere for people to socialize, since that is what we lack here," she says, though there is a restaurant in the piazza.

Near Montasola is the Romanesque abbey of Vescovio, a prime wedding location with a waiting list. Opposite the abbey, the remains of an ancient Roman market and amphitheater are being excavated. Also close by are the medieval villages of Rocchette and Rocchetine, which face each other across a large, lush gorge. The latter's church has been restored and is also used for weddings but the surrounding houses are abandoned and falling to pieces. When a foreign company wanted to buy the whole village to turn it into a hotel complex they could not locate all the owners and had to give up.



The next morning, an hour-long drive takes us through mountains, thick woods of holm oaks, fields of broom and occasionally onto dirt roads, the ancient roads that the local authorities are so busy asphaltting, much to the chagrin of the consortium members. We arrive at Casapota, which with seven hundred inhabitants and two food shops is rather large for the area.

Just below it, the Colle Cesoni estate overlooks the Farfa River. Owners Giovanni and Anna Maria Spinelli come here every weekend after working all week in Rome. As we stand by the pool, which has a perfect view of the valley below, Giovanni states with pride: "This is the future of Sabina: high-quality tourism." Scattered on the grounds are an oil-making basin and two impressive millstones harking back to the location's past and the eight hectares of olive trees in the valley below. Guests stay in what was the old room-size oven and in the former woodshed, which has been discreetly enlarged, or in the old stone country house, built in 1862. The house, which has been converted into two apartments, has been kept exactly as it was, with the mezzanine areas that were used to store fruit and the original stairs and doors. Downstairs, a large room with a long stone feed trough will be turned into a large communal living room with a fireplace, the trough will of course stay. Giovanni explains that much of the antique furniture on view was bought locally from people about to use it as firewood. "I tell them I have a huge bookcase made out of plastic," he grins, "Would you like to swap?"

Heading back toward Rome, we pass the town of Turania, built around an artificial lake of the greenest hues imaginable, and close to the border of the Abruzzo region. The nearby Ferramosca farm holiday estate, a huge stone hayloft that has been converted, stands squarely at the bottom of a valley. The leitmotif here is "quality ingredients," according to owner Otello Ferramosca, who without any formal training has taken on the role of cook extraordinaire, and is faring rather well, it seems. At least half of the produce the restaurant uses is grown on-site and at least another 30 percent is organic produce (cheeses and meats) bought locally. "It yields much less and is hard work," he says, pointing to the organic vegetable garden, "but the flavor is so much better." The restaurant opened in 2002 and so far has a "mostly Italian" clientele, says his wife Amedea, but she's hoping that with their recent entry into the consortium this will change and has converted four rooms upstairs for guests. Some people who come to the area stay longer than just a few days. Luciana told us that half her clients come back and that ten of them have bought houses in the area. As a result, finding an old ruin to restore in Sabina is almost impossible, and paying for it is even more so: A farmhouse near Selci in need of massive restoration work is currently going for €300,000, and that, apparently, is a reasonable price. But since the last batch of guests at Colle Cesoni left the following comment in the guest book—"Is this perhaps the place where Adam and Eve lived before they ate of the apple?"—you can begin to understand why people are prepared to pay.